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BEYOND PEACE EDUCATION:
TOWARD CO-POIESIS
AND ENDURING IMPROVISATION

WHAT IS WRONG WITH PEACE EDUCATION?

Peace education is currently going the wrong way: it is unwilling to address the questions concerning its path, its telos, the challenges of its goals and the relevance of its critiques. Its popularity is growing by the day precisely because of its irresponsibility, banality and good-natured disorientation. It receives at once acknowledgement and appreciation by all in an embarrassing manner. There is, however, a chance for a turn—not for peace education as such but in life possibilities themselves. The gate to other life possibilities is not locked and can never be totally sealed or eternally forgotten. Such a new way, nevertheless, is far from becoming “an alternative peace education” because of its philosophical responsibility and its unconditional commitment to eternal improvisation and Love. Yet it is of vital importance for such counter-education to challenge the false promises of present-day peace education; to face up to the existential, philosophical and political settings which make possible current peace education and the kind of power relations that threaten the very existence of the planet, an order which current peace education enables, serves, conceals and glorifies (Gur-Ze’ev, 2007, p. 302).

Peace education is currently enjoying anonymous support. It is praised and paid tribute to by most theoretical orientations, political establishments and the so-called radical movements. Who today dares courageously to challenge this idol or offer a systematic negation of the very principle of peace? Totalitarian states such as Cuba, China, Sudan, Libya or Syria are quick so sign the relevant US declarations, as are other anti-humanist regimes such as the Shiite-controlled Iran or the Sunni-controlled Saudi Arabia. We have to go beyond the fields of cynicism and the arenas of the grotesque in search for the meaning of texts such as The Yamoussouko Declaration of 1989 that called on UNESCO to

construct a new vision of peace by developing a peace culture based on the universal values of respect for life, liberty, justice, solidarity, tolerance, human rights and equality between women and men.

The year 2000 was declared by the UN as the year of “Culture of Peace” and 2001–2010 were determined as the international decade for culture of peace and non-violence for the children of the world (UNESCO, 2008). Already in 1945 the nations of the world declared that
Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed. (UN 1945)

Enlightened modernists and “soft” postmodernists, multiculturalists, feminists, critical thinkers, conservatives, and liberals all ardently participate in celebrating the new fashion with such devotion that it makes us wonder what terrible secret lies hidden in the form of such a devotion to self-forgetfulness in this feast. The challenge of peace education stretches beyond the conflict between its commitment to “a culture of peace” and its banality, dogmatism and apparent support by murderous totalitarian regimes and fanatical organizations. It transcends the opposition between its obvious modernist (humanist) ideological commitment to “a culture of peace” and its explicit support by pre-modern anti-humanist ideologies and regimes such as that of Sudan, Saudi Arabia and Iran on the one hand, and by postmodern revolutionaries and postmodern anti-West/colonialist/whiteness/phallocentrist NGOs on the other. These contradictions might be explained by “normal” political manipulations and cynicism which rules the standard UN rhetoric and the identity politics. Much more of a challenge, however, are the philosophical pre-assumptions and argumentations within the peace education theories and researchers.

Is it possible that the essence of peace is negated in peace education? And is it possible that even against its own will peace education calls for the negation of its negation? On our way to unveil what peace education conceals we come upon stiff difficulties. In peace education as a field of research, until this very moment no serious attempts have been made to elaborate its most central concepts. “Pacifism”, “violence”, “counter-violence” and “emancipation”, “culture of peace”, among others, have still not been probed.

This harsh assertion is unfortunately valid not solely in respect to the analysis of the central concepts and ideals of peace education. The synchronic drabness of this field of research is followed by its diachronic poverty. Sadly this also holds for the self-reflectivity of peace education. To date no space has been reserved for a critical historical perspective of the relation of current peace education to the dramatic history of the socialist peace movement, nor to the rich and long pacifist tradition in antiquity, in medieval times and in modernity, nor yet to the present complex postmodern neo-liberal, fundamentalist and other politics of peace.

The theoretical stance of the field, actually, calls for questioning the very justification of “peace education” as a distinctive, well-defined, self-reflective field of research and as a specific, theoretically justifiable educational practice. It is worthwhile mentioning that analytically, the reciprocity of its two fundamental concepts—the concept of “peace” and the concept of “education”—are hardly ever philosophically analyzed (Gur-Ze’ev, 2001).

Up to the present, peace education theoreticians have not bothered to elaborate on the relation between “power” and “violence”. Neither have they addressed the fruitful tension between “peace” and “freedom” in principle and in the local arenas of conflict, more especially in the present neo-liberal world order. It is as if “freedom” does not negate “peace”, at least in a pre-emancipated world. It seems